Race, Sex and Slavery: ‘Forced Labour’ in Central Asia and Afghanistan in the Early 19th Century

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Abstract

The word ‘slavery’ conjures images of cruelty, racial bigotry and economic exploitation associated with the plantation complex crucial to the Atlantic trading economy from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Yet this was only one manifestation of practices of human bondage. This article examines the practice of ‘slavery’ in a very different context, looking at Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Punjab in the early nineteenth century. Here, bondage was largely a social institution with economic ramifications, in contrast to its Atlantic counterpart. Slavery served a social, and often sexual function in many of these societies, with the majority of slaves being female domestic servants and concubines. Its victims were often religiously, rather than racially defined, although bondage was a cross-confessional phenomenon. The practice continued to be widespread throughout the region into the early twentieth century.

[The slave merchant] received me with courtesy and sent for three women from the room next to his own. They sat unveiled, and their master asked me which of the three I like the best. I pretended to select the younger one; she had regular features and most agreeable manners, her stature was elegant, and her personal attractions great . . . . After a good deal of conversation, she

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1 This article has grown out of my doctoral research on Afghan state formation in the early nineteenth century. I presented an early version of this paper to the World History Graduate Seminar at the University of Cambridge. I owe thanks to a number of people for encouraging me to write this article, as well as taking the time to read over early drafts. First and foremost is my supervisor Prof. C. A. Bayly. Dr. Francesca Orsini provided useful commentary on the South Asian aspects of this paper, while Dr. Christine van Ruymbekke gave me some comments from the Persian angle, as well as more general feedback. My wife, Lila Rabinovich, offered a wealth of critical observations, as well as faithfully proofread numerous drafts. I would also like to acknowledge my anonymous reviewer, whose insightful comments helped me strengthen the article.
felt pleased with my choice; but told me to swear not to sell her again. She was thirteen years of age, and an inhabitant of Chatrar, a place near Badakhshan. She said that she belonged to a large family, and had been carried off by the ruler of the country, who reduced her to slavery. Her eyes filled with tears, and she asked me to release her soon from the hands of the oppressive Uzbeg.²

Mohan Lal’s description of his visit to the Bukharan slave market is interesting for a variety of reasons, not least of which is his feigned surprise or genuine indifference to the plight of the young girls he saw there.³ This was a man who, despite his education at Delhi College, employment with the East India Company, and patronage by no less a man than Charles Metcalfe, reportedly maintained eighteen wives and spent Rs. 300 per month on mealtime entertainment by the so-called ‘dancing girls’ of Delhi.⁴ Yet his tale of an evening spent surveying the wares of the Bukharan slave market was one of the first, and relatively few descriptions early Victorian readership received regarding the Central Asian variant of the ‘abominable traffic’ in human flesh. Central Asian slavery remained a bustling business in the early nineteenth century, while its Atlantic variant battled ostracization, decline and eventual abolition. The overwhelming lack of literature on the subject, however, would lead one to think otherwise. Indeed, Central Asian slavery is a wholly unstudied subheading of the severely understudied issue of slavery in the Muslim world. But the fading heartland of the former galactica Islamica was not the only Asian locale supporting a lively traffic in human beings. The Punjab of Ranjit Singh, not to mention the Delhi of Charles Metcalfe’s residency claimed their share of bonded, often female personages. Thus, in examining the issue of slavery in Central Asia and Afghanistan during the early nineteenth century, the spatial scope of the inquiry is partly set by the markets they supplied as well as by the raiding grounds which furnished their slaves. This paper will therefore range in geographic breadth from Khorasan in the east, to Orenburg in the north, to Badakhshan in the west, and southwards through the Punjab. While this vast area did not constitute a single unitary market, or even practice the same ‘type’ of slavery, it did share the cultural, economic

² Mohan Lal, *Travels in the Panjub, Afghanistan, & Turkmenistan to Balk, Bokhara, and Herat; and a Visit to Great Britain and Germany* (London, 1846), 122–3.
³ He went on to write ‘As my object was only to examine the feelings of the slave-dealer, and also to gratify my curiosity, and not to purchase her, I came back to my camp without bidding farewell to the merchant.’ Ibid. 123.
and sexual institution which lay at the heart of this nineteenth century Asian variant of human bondage.

‘Slavery’ is a broad concept encompassing a number of different types of human bondage manifested in a wide diversity of forms. One of the difficulties of constructing a typology in which to contextualize ‘Central Asian’ slavery is the totalizing generalizations required for clear schematization. To discuss the various forms of human bondage under the blanket term ‘slavery’ is to argue the differences separating these forms from one another were smaller than those separating them from some hypothetical state of ‘freedom’. Yet the universe of possible outcomes after the ‘moment of transaction’ was so wide and varied that such a sweeping statement cannot be taken for granted. For instance, in the British Atlantic colonies and later United States, only one legal category of slave was recognized. Yet in British India, where different types of ‘slavery’ and bondage were practiced, fourteen different types of slaves were recognized in Anglo-Indian ‘Hindu’ law. Likewise, Islamic law formally maintained differential treatment for peoples in different types of bondage. Even within the Islamic umma, the four Sunni and two Shia schools of jurisprudence treated ‘slaves’ distinctly. Because of the great philosophical diversity within the Islamic world regarding the treatment of ‘slaves’, as well as the dissonance between theoretical constructs and practice, referring to ‘Islamic’ slavery is prohibitively problematic. In its stead, I opt for the term ‘Muslim’ slavery, in order to denote the reality that the practice of slavery within Muslim societies often had little to do with the textual precepts of Islam. ‘Muslim’ slavery also indicates the diversity of practice in areas outside the Islamic umma, but within the orbit of Islamic cultural influence, such as nineteenth century South Asia.

Likewise, discussing ‘Atlantic’, ‘Muslim’ or even ‘Central Asian’ slavery is to premise the discussion of the essentially local phenomenon on tenuously grouped geographic and cultural regions. One may legitimately question how closely the Barbary corsairs, dependant on captured Europeans for ransom and largely integrated into the Mediterranean and Atlantic economies, resembled the khanates of Central Asia who raided neighbouring Shia communities to provide

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5 I thank Dr. Francesca Orsini for proposing the term ‘moment of transaction’. Personal communication with the author. 12 January 2005.

6 Wilson, A glossary of judicial and revenue terms, and of useful words occurring in official documents relating to the administration of the government of British India (New Delhi, 1968). 128.
a sizeable labour force for their irrigated agriculture. In ways both more closely resembled their ‘Atlantic’ (another problematic term generalizing an almost hemisphere-wide practice) counterpart than each other. Yet ‘Muslim’ slavery in general, and Central Asian slavery in particular, differed greatly from its Atlantic cousin. This difference was underlaid by distinct conceptualizations of both labour and bondage, based on disparate models of social relations. Even more locally, different ethnic groups, tribes and khanates within Central Asia practiced different forms of slavery and labour bondage. Yet the conceptual utility of these large units, at least in terms of geographic and/or cultural units, outweighs their potential pitfalls. Although the unity of practice throughout the dar-al islam, or indeed its very existence may be legitimately questioned by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the pervasiveness of a central set of Islamic norms roughly delineating acceptable social practice was without doubt.

To understand the phenomenon of slavery in Afghanistan and Central Asia, one must first assess its nature, and thus the first part of this article examines the idea of ‘Muslim’ slavery. The discussion of the nature of slavery in the Muslim world is followed by an examination of its specific manifestation in Central Asia and Afghanistan, problematizing the issue of slavery and labour in the region’s unique geographical and cultural context. The article then continues its move southwards with a discussion of Ranjit Singh’s dancing or ‘nauch girls’. This section examines the sexual overtones and implications of slavery throughout the region, broaching a topic hitherto only described, rather than analyzed. The penultimate section relates a personalized narrative of Central Asian enslavement authored in the 1920s. Although beyond the strict chronological limits of this paper, Rustam Khan-Urf’s Diary of a slave offers important insights into the character of bondage and challenges orthodox assumptions regarding the institution’s suppression. The conclusion joins these seemingly unrelated themes together, placing the practice of Central Asia slavery in the context of events affecting the region and its peoples.

Before outlining a ‘typology’ of slavery, a discussion of the article’s self-imposed limits is in order. Temporally, this article examines the practice in the first half of the nineteenth century. Where necessary, it looks back to historical precedent and context, such as in the explanation of the development of Islamic law regarding slavery, to place its argument in a broader analytical framework. The focus is in part a consequence of the doctoral research this paper grows out
of. More profoundly however, the early nineteenth century remains a largely ignored period for much of the region, save India. This reflects a long-standing perception of chaos and political instability in the region at this time, which has led many historians to dismiss it as a period of social and cultural decline. But as scholarship has clearly demonstrated in the case of eighteenth century India, the early nineteenth century in Afghanistan and Central Asia, although certainly a period of political fragmentation and instability, was also a creative and formative period of political identity. Geographically, the inclusion of the Punjab is justified by its former cultural and political unity with Afghanistan and Central Asia, rather than South Asia. The Punjab continued to be a vassal of the Durrani Empire as late as 1799. Viewing the Punjab from the Afghan and Central Asian, rather than South Asian perspective, challenges much of the present work emphasizing continuities within South Asia. Yet, this neither detracts from nor dismisses the wealth of this sophisticated scholarship. On the contrary, it is an attempt to emphasize my own limits of scholarly inquiry and knowledge. If this paper remains silent on the commonalities between slavery in the Punjab and Bengal, it is not because they did not exist. Rather, it is because I am more interested here in the continuities between the Punjab and the Central Asian khanates.

Analytically, this article repeatedly draws comparisons between wider categories of slavery, differentiating the phenomenon as observed in Central and South Asia from that concurrently practiced in the Atlantic world. Such comparisons necessarily focus on specific aspects and interpretations of slavery in each context, totalizing categories for the sake of analytical clarity. Yet these comparisons are valuable in that they locate this analysis in the more familiar, and well-developed debates concerning Atlantic slavery. By doing so, I hope to present what must be a completely new topic for many readers in a familiar form. Not only will this make the topic more accessible, but it also firmly grounds the phenomenon examined here as a social one with economic repercussions, rather than an economic one with social ramifications. Finally, it must be emphasized this paper analyzes a perspective offered by Anglophone sources. These, understandably, give only part of the picture. Important work remains to be done on

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7 For an example of revisionist historiography of South Asia’s eighteenth century, see Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (Delhi, 1986).
To best understand Central Asian slavery, it is necessary to place it within a ‘typology’ of slavery. For clarity, one need examine slavery in terms of its elemental construction, denoting its constituent elements as categories of analysis. The key elements of slavery include its legal, sexual, domestic, laboural and economic character. These elements are inter-related and the boundaries between them are often difficult to decisively locate. They do, however, offer a conceptual structure for a comparative analysis of slavery in different locations at different times. In formal terms, slavery’s most basic element was its legal character, treating persons as property, ‘owned’ by other persons. Legal definition created and affected status and norms of treatment, determining as well as reflecting social relations, rights and responsibilities. The hybrid legal personality of the victims of Muslim slavery reflected the ambivalence of social attitudes towards them. Neither wholly chattel nor wholly human, slaves inhabited a legal netherworld in Muslim societies, privileged in comparison to the chattel slaves of much of antiquity and the Atlantic economy. Arguably, this was a consequence of a weaker sense of ‘private property’ rights in the Muslim world compared to that developed in Europe and its colonies. Slavery, a relationship based on an extreme power differential, continued to be imbued with important sexual overtones into the nineteenth century. Muslim slavery closely resembled that of Western antiquity with its explicit approval of sexual relations between slave and master. Atlantic slavery, on the other hand, failed to recognize such relationships as legitimate, instead bastardizing the mulatto progeny of illicit master/slave relations.

The laboural character of slavery heavily coloured the physical treatment of its victims. The slavery of antiquity, ancestor of both later Christian and Muslim variants, was harsh and widespread. By some accounts, upwards of thirty percent of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. Slavery was likewise widespread in the Persian empire of the Achaemenids and their successors. As Europe and the lands of Islam turned away from pagan antiquity, they adopted many of its institutions, or rather acceded to their continuance. Islam’s

9 This was similar to the percentage of the population slaves constituted in the Americas. Phillips, ‘Continuity and change in Western slavery: ancient to modern times’, in Bush (ed.), Serfdom and Slavery, 74.
monotheistic antecedents, Christianity and Judaism, permitted the practice of slavery. European and Islamic societies practiced slavery through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. With the discovery of the Americas and subsequent death of the majority of its indigenous population however, the European variant assumed an increasingly harsh aspect. The Atlantic slave trade flourished, with African slaves providing the labour mainstay of American plantations throughout the Western hemisphere. The black slave labour population became the basis of American primary production, feeding the European economy. Atlantic slavery was therefore first and foremost a solution to a shortage of manual labour caused by the decimation of the Amerindian population. As such, it developed into a human technology, responsive to the demands of economic productivity and central to the Atlantic economy.

In contrast, slavery within the dar-al islam generally did not resemble the harsh plantation-style slavery of the Atlantic world. The comparatively privileged social and legal position of slaves in Islam laid the foundation for a less physically abusive type of human bondage. Slavery within the Muslim world assumed a more prominent social and political importance than its economically oriented Atlantic counterpart. By the nineteenth century, most slaves entered the domestic sphere, serving in the main a social function. Yet their domestic service was not without important economic consequences, too often ignored as ‘unproductive labour’. In nineteenth century

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12 While Central Asian ghulam military slaves had been historically important and prominent throughout Islamic history, slave-based armies had largely collapsed by the nineteenth century, instead replaced by free labour ones. Even the Ottomans and Mamluks, historically dependent on slave armies, moved away from reliance on ghulams and modernized their armies and recruitment systems. For example, the Ottomans eliminated the janissaries and introduced conscription during the tanzimat reforms.

13 William Phillips voices the traditional devaluation, or even dismissal of the productive importance of domestic labour, writing ‘Much of the employment of domestic slaves must be described as unproductive labour, for slaves were usually assigned to non-economic tasks; their employment was often totally independent of
Central Asia, one finds a hybrid of the Atlantic and classic Islamic strains of slavery. A number of Central Asian slaves provided the necessary labour force to work the region’s irrigated agriculture. In addition to agricultural labourers, the slave market concentrated on women—sold for domestic servitude, and pleasure. Central Asia thus presents a radically different practice of slavery than that generally familiar to the Western audience.

‘Islamic’ Slavery

Slavery in the Islamic world did not find its origins in either the Koran or the sayings of the Prophet, but like slavery in the Christian world reached back to deeper roots in pre-monotheistic societies. By the time of Muhammad’s revelation, the practice of slavery was well established in Arabia. In the lands of conquest where slavery did not exist as an indigenous institution, Muslim warriors brought it with them. Islamic teachings attempted to moderate the severity of the institution, entreating masters to treat their slaves well and reminding them that their Muslim slaves were their brothers. Like its monotheistic counterparts however, Islam failed to call for the abrogation of the institution within the dar-al islam. Central to Islamic teachings about slavery was the categorization of who could, and who could not be enslaved. First and foremost, the enslavement of Muslims received a blanket ban. The ban did not apply to those slaves who converted to Islam after their enslavement. This distinction created a ‘moral hazard’ for Islamic slavers on the frontiers of non-Islamic lands. It ensured their encouragement of proselytization to non-Muslim tribes before enslavement would be ambivalent at best.14

The main sources of the slave population were those born as slaves, and non-Muslims taken in a lesser jihad, or properly sanctioned religious war. Non-Muslim peoples within Islamic lands, especially the ‘people of the book’—namely Christians and Jews—could not be enslaved as long as they paid the dhimmi, a religious tax allowing the normal modes of labour in the society. As servants, guards, and sexual partners, their primary function in many cases was to demonstrate the wealth and luxury enjoyed by their owners. Phillips, ‘Continuity and change in Western slavery: ancient to modern times’, in Bush (ed.), Serfdom and slavery, 72. For a reassessment of domestic labour as an economically productive activity, see for instance Mackintosh, ‘Domestic labour and the household’, in Burman (ed.), Fit Work for Women (London, 1979).

them to practice their confession. Both categories—those born slaves and prisoners of war—had further limitations. For instance, a child fathered by a slave woman’s master was considered free, and the woman gained her freedom upon the death of her master. The failure of the slave population to reproduce itself forced Muslim societies to look for exogenous sources. Compounding this need was the adoption of the Byzantine practice of harems and the eunuchs charged with guarding them. Islamic law forbade the mutilation of the body, thus requiring eunuchs to be exogenously, rather than indigenously, produced. Enslavement of prisoners of war was only one potential outcome for these captives, the others including conversion or death. Jewish and Christian captives, like their confessional compatriots already living in Islamic lands, were legally entitled to the opportunity of retaining their confessions upon payment the dhimmi. This exemption, however, was not universally granted.

In the Muslim world, slavery was largely a social and political institution, compared with the economic and technological one it developed into in the Atlantic context. This does not mean common practices were not present in both the Atlantic and Muslim worlds. Rather it emphasizes the conceptualization and importance of slavery within these respective cultural spheres. With some exceptions, notably the Zandjs in lower Mesopotamia in the ninth century and Central Asian slaves in the nineteenth century, slaves did not work in plantation-style agriculture or perform particularly labour-intensive activities. Instead, they largely fulfilled roles of domestic servitude, and served in the armies and bureaucracies of Islamic rulers. Arguably the most famous Islamic slaves are the Turkish ghulams from the Central Asian steppes who provided the military might of a number of Islamic empires. Their loyalty to their masters and steppe-inspired fighting techniques made them especially popular in the heartlands of the dar-al islam. The phenomenon of slave armies, though not unique to the Muslim world, was notable for its scale. It was fundamental to the structure of power within the dar-al islam—not as an appendage, but often as an arbiter.

15 Ibid. 25.
16 This practice was known as umm walad.
17 For a further discussion of this, see Gordon, Slavery in the Arab World, 76–81. In India, this was not the case as the majority Hindu population produced eunuchs.
The multiplicity of roles fulfilled by slaves, and the vastly different circumstances those positions carried with them make it difficult to generalize about slaves in the Muslim world. Indeed, even the word ‘slave’ is itself problematic as it neither distinguishes between different forms or degrees of bondage, nor accounts for regional variation. By discussing ‘Muslim slavery’ one is forced to generalize and totalize about a social institution which varied widely over both time and space. Even within the geographic limitations of this article, there existed marked differences, both in language and practice. Central Asian ghulams were not Persian bands, and neither were South Asian dasas, nor bands. The meaning of these words was continually shaped and re-shaped by local circumstances, not always endogenously produced. The tension between generalizing about the existence and character of slavery within the dar-al islam and particularizing about specific societies at certain times remains unresolved. Indeed, the language of slavery continues to be as diverse as the experience arguably was. The Encyclopaedia of Islam lists slavery under the Arabic abd while Wilson’s dictionary of Anglo-Indian legal terms places the main definition under the Hindi dasa. To translate both these terms simply as ‘slave’, as academics did for the Encyclopaedia and administrators for Wilson’s dictionary, strikes one as particularly unsatisfactory. What must, therefore, be emphasized is the specificity of experience, while at the same time not losing sight of the commonalities of those experiences.

Slaves occupied a legal limbo in Islamic jurisprudence, neither fully chattel nor fully human. Their owners maintained virtually unrestricted legal rights over them, including ‘enjoyment’ of female slaves. Owners could sell slaves as they liked and demand almost any labour of them. While discouraged from severely beating or killing a slave, punishment or social sanctions for such an act were minimal. This legal devaluation of slaves as persons permeated ideas of punishment for criminal acts perpetrated by them. Slaves who

committed crimes faced a penalty half as severe as those inflicted on freemen. The most interesting example of this concerned adultery. Because slaves were not considered persons possessing free will, Islamic jurists did not consider them capable of legally consummating a marriage. Thus, in a legal sense, slaves were unable to commit adultery. Those guilty of infidelity consequently received forty lashes rather than the death penalty. Although formally considered unable to consummate a marriage, in practice slaves were allowed to marry and often to conduct their own business. Manumission, the voluntary freeing of slaves, was encouraged as a pious deed. In at least one instance, that of a freeman breaking a vow of chastity with his wife, the only acceptable act of contrition was the manumission of a slave. From early on then, slaves were intimately tied, at least jurisprudentially, with the sexual behaviour of free men. Additionally, slaves could be freed on their masters’ death or manumitted by contract where they purchased their freedom over a period of time.

The prominence of female slaves and their role as domestic servants necessitates a re-examination of the phenomenon in economic terms. Much scholarship examining the Atlantic slave trade has problematized slavery as a response to a labour shortage for the American plantation economy. In Central Asia however, the case seems far from clear that the ghulamayat was either a response to an agricultural labour shortage, or a substantial contributor to the labour force. While some slaves did work in agriculture, numbers are far from clear, although they certainly did not constitute the majority of slaves. Yet to claim that because slaves in the Muslim world did not, in general, participate in visible sectors of the economy, they had neither an economic nor labour importance is misleading. As Indrani Chatterjee has argued, domestic functions carry important economic consequences. She writes ‘...the inherently gendered and ageist conceptualization of ‘productive’ slave-labour erases various kinds of work performed by female and infant slaves as labour.’ As elsewhere, the nature of Muslim slavery was shaped by the nature and needs of Muslim societies. The early and pervasive practice of cloistering women of rank within the harem or zenana, behind the purdah,

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Chatterjee, Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India, 4.
deprived wealthy Islamic households, and wider society, of these women’s labour. A need was thus created, through social practice, for some source of labour to fulfil the duties abandoned by the *purdah*ed women. This need was complemented by the ability of these wealthy households to pay for replacement labour, an option unavailable to most. The necessity of these labourers to move between the cloistered world of the *zenana* and the public world of men ensured them at the very least a low and dishonoured status, if not a physically disfigured one in the case of eunuchs. Muslim slaves were therefore very much an integrated part of the social economies in which they were enslaved. Yet their participation in the ‘invisible’ economic sector made their labour and economic significance easy to ignore.

Slaves enjoyed substantial social mobility. Their status in Muslim societies, though less than that of freemen, cannot be equated with that of black slaves in the Americas. Although many, perhaps the majority of slaves in the western Muslim world were black Africans, slavery failed to engender racism to the extent seen in the West. There was, however, a distinct categorization of peoples who were thought to make better slaves, or more specifically better fulfilled certain slave roles. These categories were generally ethnically, rather than racially based. Throughout much of the Muslim world, Georgian and Circassian women were the most highly valued concubines, while Central Asian Turkmen were esteemed for their military prowess. The lack of social stigmatism of either the institution or its victims allowed slaves a great degree of social mobility within the larger societies they were part of. This was especially true for military slaves and female slaves of the *harem*, or concubines.

A number of Muslim empires were consciously slave-based, including the Mamluks of Egypt and the Delhi Sultanate. Virtually every Muslim empire employed slaves in their imperial bureaucracies. The Ottomans relied on the *devshirme*, or tri-annual harvesting of young Christian boys from their Balkan provinces, to create an imperial bureaucratic elite. The importance of the *harem* allowed some female slaves to exert a large amount of political influence, often unthinkable.

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26 For more on the phenomenon of Islamic slave states in South Asian, see generally Wink, *Al-Hind, the Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (Leiden, 1991).

27 For a discussion of the nineteenth century Ottoman attitudes towards slavery, see Toledano, ‘Ottoman concepts of slavery in the period of reform, 1830s-1880s’, in Klein (ed.), *Breaking the Chains*. 
for their free counterparts in the West.\textsuperscript{28} The jurisprudential legitimacy of sons of \textit{harem} concubines meant more than one ruler, including some of the Caliphs and imams, was born of a slave mother.\textsuperscript{29} These observations are nuanced, however, by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Mier’s observation that even within societies where relative mobility for the slaves existed, the most important factor determining the extent of that mobility was the slave’s point of entry into society. Societies with multiple ‘entry gates’, although initially offering a variety of social positions to slaves, did not necessarily allow much mobility between different strata of society once a slave entered. Thus while the Ottoman Empire had slave \textit{viziers}, the ‘entry gate’ of a potential \textit{vizier} was not the same as that of an agricultural labourer.\textsuperscript{30} Yet even with this circumscribed mobility, in comparison to its Western counterpart slavery in the Muslim world offered a much greater degree of opportunity and social integration uninhibited by the stigmatization of racial overtones.

\section*{Slavery in Central Asia}

Central Asian slaves came from a multiplicity of origins, in the main non-Sunni, including Orthodox Russian serfs, Shia Persians and Hazaras, Kafirs, and Badakhshanis. The religiously defined categorization of acceptable slaves made the \textit{ghulam} institution remarkably permeable, fundamentally distinguishing it from Western practice. Religion, rather than race provided the essential criterion for enslavement. Sectarian allegiance, however, often followed ethnic lines. While Orthodox Christian Russians were the most visible enslaved religious group, their prominence was largely a consequence of the unceasing utilization of their captivity by the Russian government for political and propaganda purposes.\textsuperscript{31} Most of these Russians lived as serfs in Tsarist lands and were kidnapped by roving bands of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28} On the political importance of the \textit{harem} in the Ottoman context, see generally Alderson, \textit{The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty} (Oxford, 1956).

\textsuperscript{29} Afnan, \textit{Black Pearls: Servants in the households of the Bab and Baha’ullah} (Los Angeles, 1988), xv.


\textsuperscript{31} Meyendorf’s report appears confused about the number of Russian slaves in Bukhara. At one point, the narrative places the number of Russian slaves in Bukhara}
Turkmen tribesmen who controlled large swathes of the Central Asian steppe.\(^{32}\) The majority of slaves, however, were Shi'ite minorities. The same Turkmen raiders who abducted Russian serfs also kidnapped Persian pilgrims and peasants from Khorasan, a province under the tenuous control of the Qajars. Shahzadeh Kamran, the Saddozai Afghan overlord of Herat, sold upwards of 12,000 of his Shi'ite subjects to Khiva as a short-term expedient to raise revenue, and also to ensure loyalty during the Persian sieges of the 1830s.\(^{33}\) His Sunni Hazara allies enslaved their fellow Hazaras who were of the Shia persuasion. To the northeast, the reclusive Kafirs of Kafiristan were highly prized as slaves, especially the women.\(^{34}\)

Slavery, and slave raiding in Afghanistan and Central Asia could not always be clearly distinguished from political persecutions and forced relocations. Mir Murad Beg, ruler of Kunduz in the 1820s and 1830s, sold a number of Badakhshanis as slaves following his conquest of this region. Those he did not sell he moved en masse from their mountainous homeland to the plains surrounding his capital Kunduz. Many reportedly died there from the diseases bred in the surrounding swamps.\(^{35}\) Slavery often offered an alternative strategy of depopulation and enforced settlement turned to for either revenue or the establishment of political control—if not both. Abdur Rahman Khan, the so-called ‘Iron Amir’ of Afghanistan, employed

at a mere ten, while it later insists there were 5–600 Russian captives. Scheidler, *A Journey from Orenburg to Bokhara in the Year 1820* (Calcutta, 1870), 36, 61.

\(^{32}\) See for instance Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara; together with a narrative of a voyage on the Indus* (Lahore, 2003), 136–7; IOR L/PS/5/109, Dispatch from Moorcroft to George Swinton, 6 June 1825.

\(^{33}\) As a revenue source, Kamran’s Shias do not appear to have been a boon to the treasury, with between twelve and twenty of them being bartered for a horse. Lawrence, *Adventures of an Officer in the Service of Runjeet Singh* (Karachi, 1975), 141. See also NAI Pottinger to Macnaghten, 11 July 1838; IOR L/PS/5/127, Copy of a letter from the Persia Envoy Extraordinary: McNeill to Macnaghten, 22 January 1837; IOR L/PS/5/130, Notice on Herat, with a Sketch of the state of affairs in the surrounding counties (Burnes to Wade), 7 February 1838.

\(^{34}\) Alexander Burnes related his experience of examining a young Kafir boy who had been kidnapped and enslaved in Kabul. See IOR V 3320, On the Siah-Posh Kaffirs, with Specimens of their Language and Costume, 14 February 1838.

\(^{35}\) Between their enslavement and forced relocation, Moorcroft claims only a fifth of the original population of Badakhshan survived. IOR L/PS/5/109, Dispatch from Moorcroft to George Swinton, 6 June 1825. See also IOR V 3320, *A Memoir on the Uzbek State of Kundooz and the power of its present Ruler Mahomed Murad Beg*, 1838.
both strategies in dealing with the Sunni Hazaras during his jihads of the 1890s.  

The character of slavery, and the political and/or economic ends it was deployed to fulfil, largely depended on the social mores of its beneficiaries. Mountstuart Elphinstone insisted slavery was rare amongst the Pashtun Afghans, portraying it almost as a familial relationship. The Afghans reportedly ‘reviled’ the Uzbeks for enslaving others. This explanation for dissonant attitudes expressed by neighbouring groups lay in the normative orders which regulated social interaction for each. For the Pashtun, their tribal code, the Pashtunwali, elevated honour and individualism as central tenets of Pashtun society. Slavery was understood to fundamentally transgress these values, placing it, in the main, beyond the pale of acceptable social behaviour. In contrast, the Uzbeks had no similar tribal code condemning the practice, and indeed social mores and economic conditions encouraged the practice. These must, however, be understood as social predispositions, rather than determinations. Despite the Pashtunwali’s hostility to the practice, slavery, though not widespread, was an observable reality amongst the Pashtun.

The transformation of Central Asia from a source of supply to a market for slavery was not as profound as it at first appears. The presence of slaves in Central Asia was nothing new. Yet the demise of the slave military market, previously supplied by Turkish military ghulams from Central Asia, transformed the region from a market of supply to one of demand. The military labour market continued vibrantly in South Asia through the eighteenth century, but had largely collapsed in Persia under the aegis of the Safavids. The Ottoman tanzimat reforms eliminated, both politically and physically, the janissaries who had long been the repository of power in Istanbul. Turkish ghulams fell out of favour because of the new exigencies and modernizing pressures which Islamic powers found themselves facing. Some states, such as Safavid and Qajar Persia,
and Durrani Afghanistan, relied heavily on tribal levies rather than slave contingents. Expanding European empires forced local rulers increasingly to adopt Western military norms by the nineteenth century, which entailed regularizing their military forces. In India, where Afghan mercenaries previously replaced Turkish ghulams, the presence and success of the East India Company transformed the military labour market, sparking a move towards mass infantry locally recruited, rather than Central Asian, Afghan and Maratha cavalry hordes hitherto dominating warfare in the subcontinent. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, the sun had set on the institution of Central Asian military ghulams throughout the Muslim world, transforming Central Asia from an exporter to ‘consumer’ of slaves.

As the nature of Central Asian slavery changed, so too did its victims. The demands of the internal Central Asian slave market were profoundly different from those of the markets it previously supplied. The nearly universal collapse of ghulam-based military structures meant the Central Asian market neither demanded nor sold military ghulams. Instead, female slaves and agricultural workers constituted the mainstay of the market, sold to the people who had themselves formerly been sold in the military labour market. Many of these slaves, especially the women, worked as domestic servants, whom a male owner could legally ‘enjoy’. A number of women also were forced to work as sex slaves. Yet the status of enslaved women varied widely, ranging from domestic servants occasionally raped by their masters to pampered concubines who became politically powerful in their

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40 The Safavids combined the role of tribal levy and Turkish ghulam in their recruitment of Qizilbash Turkic tribesmen as religious devotees of Shah Ismail and the later basis of their military power.


42 Although some rulers maintained ghulam contingents as household guards, etc, tribal levies, peasant recruits and mercenaries constituted the bulk of military forces. One such local example was the ruler of Maimana, in northwest Afghanistan, who maintained a household guard of almost 500 ghulams well into the nineteenth century. Lee, The Ancient Supremacy: Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731–1901 (Leiden, 1996). 139.
own right. Bukhara and Khiva served as the largest slave markets in Central Asia by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Most of the people sold had been kidnapped. Persian and Russian captives were often ransomed, even after being sold, either by private individuals or through government-sponsored collections. This was strikingly similar to the way European states earlier ransomed their captive subjects in north Africa. The Bukharans and Khivans, however, were not always ready to sell. Baron Meyendorff’s Russian mission to Bukhara in 1820 attempted to purchase the freedom of a number of Russian slaves. Upon hearing this, the Amir forbade the sale of their countrymen to the Russians.

The minority status of slavers’ victims was as much a reflection of opportunity as of a developed attitude to target religious outsiders. While there was a sophisticated body of Islamic jurisprudence regarding the treatment and sectarian identity of slaves, the dissonance between theory and practice was obviously great. This dissonance increased the further one moved from established religious centres, such as Bukhara. It is therefore little surprise that Khiva, without an established, politically powerful community of ulama, emerged as the centre of the Central Asian slave trade. Khiva’s slaving activities are particularly revealing of the sectarian, as well as ethnic aspects of the institution. The khanate’s Uzbek ruling elite, who in the main owned and profited from the oasis’ irrigated cultivation, were the chief consumers of Persian slave labour. Yet the nomadic tribes of Turkmen inhabiting the trans-Caspian steppe were the central suppliers of that labour. The market thus worked on a clear ethnic division of labour, with Shia Persians providing the labour,

43 Meyendorff reported there were between 25–40,000 Persian slaves alone in Bukharan territories. The average price of a ‘well-built man’ was between 640–800 Francs, while a skilled craftsman such as a blacksmith could fetch up to 16,000 Francs. Women apparently sold for less, but beautiful ones could be sold for as much as 2400 Francs. He estimated that wealthy Bukharans had an average of forty slaves. Scheidler, A Journey from Orenburg to Bokhara in the Year 1820, 61–2.


45 Scheidler, A Journey from Orenburg to Bokhara in the Year 1820, 61.

46 Quoting a Persian emissary from 1851, Holdsworth states Persian slaves accounted for half of the settled population of Khiva in the mid-nineteenth century. The khanate reportedly had a population of around 700,000, with the Uzbek ruling elite numbering near 40,000. The nomadic Turkmen, who were the main slave raiders, constituted a third of the population. Holdsworth, Turkestan in the Nineteenth Century: a brief history of the khanates of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva (Oxford, 1959). 21–2.
Uzbek landlords consuming it and Turkic tribesmen supplying it. This division was replicated in other slave markets, such as Bukhara.

What does such a division tell us about attitudes towards the enslaved and the grounds on which slavers based their social alienation of slavery’s victims, allowing them to exploit slave labour? The fact the victims were both sectarian and ethnic outsiders makes it difficult to disaggregate these elements of their identity. There was an established practice of Sunni enslavement of Shias grounded in the belief of the latter’s exclusion from the Islamic moral universe. Amongst some Sunnis, this practice was even theologically sanctioned. Yet one finds few, if any instances where this sectarian difference was, in and of itself, sufficient to justify enslavement. When joined with a victim’s ethnic identity, sectarian affiliation became a powerful, and potentially dangerous mark of distinction. In the majority of cases, sectarian difference followed ethnic boundaries, making the two near impossible to differentiate. For many of these ethnic groups, such as the Pashtun, Islam was a constituent element of their ethnic identity.47 Sectarian adherence thus provided an easy indicator of difference, encompassing a wider variety of communal characteristics than simply Shia or Sunni.

The Russians, who as both firengi and infidels were obvious targets of slave raiders, began dispatching diplomatic and military missions across the Kirghiz and Kazakh steppes to the Central Asian khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and later Kokand, by the beginning of the eighteenth century.48 Russian missions returned to Orenburg with reports of Russian slaves working throughout the region. Imperial authorities for the most part ignored these until the end of the eighteenth century and the return of Catherine II’s envoy from Khiva. Russian attitudes towards Khiva hardened and imperial authorities repeatedly demanded the release of Russian slaves, using the Khivan’s intransigence as rhetorical justification for increasingly aggressive attempts to penetrate the khanate. When these demands went unheeded, Tsar Nicolas, attending the annual trade fair in Nishni Novgorod in 1834, ordered all Khivan merchants to be seized. Their goods were sold, with proceeds forfeited to the imperial coffers and

48 For a summary of Russian activities in Central Asia, see Krausse, Russia in Asia (London, 1899), Geiss, Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia: Communal commitment and political order in change (London, 2003).
the merchants exiled to Siberia. The incident, justified as a reprisal against the ‘immoral’ enslavement of Russian peasants, was really about market access for Russian goods and merchants. As such, it illustrates the essentially commercial, and thus political nature of Russian policy interests. The Russians had for some time been attempting to break into the Central Asian caravan trade, a desire made ever more pressing by the appearance of British goods in the Bukharan bazaar. Local merchants, who stood to lose the most, proved recalcitrant. The removal of these merchants, under the pretext of the Khivan khan’s flippancy towards Russian anti-slavery demands, was fundamental to Russia’s strategic and economic interests in the region.

Khivan reaction to the Russian’s seizure of their merchants in 1834 proved predictably escalatory. Safely separated from the Tsar’s forces by a harsh steppe environment successfully penetrated by only a few Russian envoys, the khan of Khiva encouraged Turkmen raids on the borderlands to disrupt commerce with Russia. Slave raids thus increased, rather than diminished in intensity, provoking the Russians to attempt a more decisive intervention against the trade’s main sponsor, not to mention its closest Central Asian competitor. The Russians attempted an invasion of Khiva in 1839. An army of 6000 troops, commanded by General Perovski, then military governor of Orenburg, and supported by over 10,000 transport camels was dispatched into the wastes of the Kirghiz and Kazakh steppes. The invasion was an unmitigated disaster, with the Russian contingent forced to withdraw halfway after suffering severe losses of men and camels from cold and poor planning. Russian castigation of the Khivan slavers awaited another attempt. Unfortunately for Khiva, Russian arms were backed by technological breakthroughs as well as a graduated learning curve which inevitably ensured their success in penetrating the steppe so long inuring the khanate from its imperial neighbour. The Russians eventually conquered and annexed Khiva, Bukhara and Kokand by the 1860s and 1870s. Their military success, however, failed to end the region’s slave trade.

49 See IOR L/PS/5/128, Copy of a dispatch from the Political Agent at Loodiana, 27 June 1837.
50 See, for example the published Russian notice justifying its interference in Khiva in Vinge, A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan and of a Residence at the Court of Dost Muhamed with Notices of Ranjit Singh, Khiva and the Russian Expedition (Lahore, 1999), 465–6.
51 Holdsworth, Turkestan in the Nineteenth Century, 51.
Few contemporaries accepted Russian complaints about the enslavement of their subjects in Central Asia without scepticism. Although Russia’s claims entered a European public sphere increasingly critical of slavery, more than one observer thought the Tsarist’ authorities’ rhetoric rather disingenuous. G.T. Vigne, one of the few Europeans to travel through Afghanistan, thought that ‘with twenty-three million of serfs, she [Russia] might as well have commenced the work of liberation a little nearer home.’52 Other European governments, especially the British, refused to openly break with Russia’s condemnation of Central Asian slavery. Yet some East India Company servants believed the position of the Russian slaves in Central Asia no worse than their former serf status.53 It does not appear the Russians either shared this scepticism or believed it to be of consequence. In an era of European expansionism and increasingly racist rhetoric, slavery as such was not the issue. Indeed, it would be surprising if it were given not only serfdom within Russia, but also the continued prominence of slavery within the Euro-Atlantic world through the middle of the nineteenth century.

Within Russia itself, the abolition of serfdom, though of arguable importance to a small, but significant number of ‘enlightened nobility’, did not gain traction as a policy priority until after defeat in the Crimean War.54 The Tsar’s government and the majority of nobles considered it a foundation of autocratic authority on which the security and stability of the Russian state rested. While Russian abolitionist rhetoric borrowed the language of universal rights and freedoms of the Enlightenment, it did not share the moral repugnance of its Western counterpart. Within abolitionist circles, free labour arguments about the retarding consequences of serfdom on social and national progress assumed greater prominence than arguments about the practice’s immorality.55 The Orthodox Church maintained an ambivalent attitude towards serfdom even after its own serf holdings

52 Vinge, A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan, 450.
53 IOR L/PS/5/109, Dispatch from Moorcroft to George Swinton, 6 June 1825.
54 By the 1840s however, there was an emerging consensus within the Russian government the institution of serfdom was becoming increasingly untenable. As early as 1839, the Third Department, or political police, argued in their annual report the Tsarist government should pre-empt potential difficulties through early emancipation. Kolchin, ‘In defense of servitude: American proslavery and Russian proserfdom arguments, 1760–1860’, The American Historical Review 85, 4 (1980), 820–1.
were forfeited to the state.\textsuperscript{56} Without a beacon of moral outrage upon which to anchor itself, the Russian abolitionist movement thus failed to cultivate the moral resonance seen in the evangelically based abolitionist movement of the West.

Although Russian rhetoric regarding Central Asia focused on the enslavement of its subjects, Russian indignation centred on the subjugation of Christian subjects by Muslim overlords rather than servitude itself.\textsuperscript{57} Russian interference in Persia was likewise justified, if not inspired by its hubris as protector of Christian subjects and Romanov aspirations to be the ‘Third Rome’.\textsuperscript{58} The murder of the Russian counsel in Tabriz was instigated by his attempt to repatriate women he considered Russian subjects who had been enslaved and forced to convert to Islam.\textsuperscript{59} The Russians discovered a powerful rhetorical weapon with the indignation of Christian subjugation by Muslim overlords. Evangelicals in Britain fiercely denounced slavery in all its manifestations, but Central Asian slavery in some way seemed particularly reprehensible, even heathen.\textsuperscript{60} Russian political rhetoric thus paralyzed overt British opposition to Russian expansion in Central Asia in a way it failed to with the Ottomans. This was partly a consequence of the disparity of strategic interests and prestige invested in Ottoman, as opposed to Central Asian lands. At least rhetorically, the prevalence of slavery throughout the Central Asian khanates provided the Russians a largely unassailable \textit{carte blanche} to interfere in the region in order to suppress the trade. After all, the

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\textsuperscript{56} Kolchin, ‘In defense of servitude’, 815; Mironov, ‘When and why was the Russian peasantry emancipated?’ in Bush (ed.), \textit{Serfdom and Slavery}, 339.

\textsuperscript{57} Even this objection was not born out in practice. In its recently conquered Caucasian provinces, Tsarist authorities actively participated in the region’s slave trade which was carried out under the precepts of the \textit{sharia}. Bivar, ‘The portraits and career of Mohammed Ali, son of Kazem-Beg: Scottish missionaries and Russian Orientalism’, \textit{Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London} vol. 57, no. 2 (1994), 285.

\textsuperscript{58} Such attitudes represented a reversal of the integrationist policies of Catherine II. See for example Fisher, \textit{The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772–1783} (Cambridge, 1970), 148–50.

\textsuperscript{59} NAI MacDonald to Lt. Col. MacDonald, 10 July 1829; NAI MacDonald to the Secretary to Government, Political Department, 12 June 1829. For a recent history of this incident, see Kelly, \textit{Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran: Alexander Griboyedov and Imperial Russia's mission to the Shah of Persia} (London, 2002).

\textsuperscript{60} For a palpable sense of Evangelical sentiments towards Central Asian slavery and how the practice was depicted by Evangelicals who visited the region, see generally Conolly, \textit{Journey to the North of India, Over the Land from England through Russia, Persia and Afghanistan} (London, 1834); Wolff, \textit{Travels and Adventures} (London, 1861).
\end{footnotesize}
Royal Navy was ruling the waves off the African coast for precisely the same reasons, or so London publicly insisted.

While denunciation of the *ghulamayat* was nearly universal amongst Western observers, condemnation of the concept of slavery itself remained controversial. The attitude of the observer was largely determined by his generational norms, with older Company servants apparently less bothered by the moral implications of the practice. William Moorcroft and Arthur Conolly provide an interesting generational contrast.\(^61\) Moorcroft’s ambivalent attitude towards slavery is revealing of the cultural dissonance between its practice in different locales. Although he condemned the Central Asian practice, he believed American slavery to be considerably more humane and therefore not simply justifiable, but also beneficial to the slaves themselves.\(^62\) Arthur Conolly on the other hand, a devout evangelical, was genuinely revolted by slavery in all its manifestations.\(^63\)

Conolly represented a new breed of British officer rising through the ranks of the East India Company. Though as ambitious as their elders, they came forward with a different language of legitimate political discourse and were the spearhead of the evangelical ethic appropriating the policy process from the mid-1830s onwards.\(^64\)

\(^61\) Moorcroft and Conolly provide more than simply an interesting intellectual contrast. Both died while on semi-official missions to Central Asia/Afghanistan, largely due to their treatment by local rulers. Amir Nasrullah of Bukhara beheaded Conolly, along with Col. Stoddart, in 1842. Conolly had volunteered to go to Bukhara and attempt to secure Stoddart’s release, who had been earlier deputed on a mission to the khanate to explain British actions in Afghanistan. Conolly used his mission to champion abolition to the Amir, but British actions in Afghanistan made both men’s position untenable. Moorcroft, on the other hand, died of a fever outside of Balkh, reportedly due to the mistreatment he received at the hands of Mir Murad Beg. He was returning from Bukhara, whence he had been granted leave by the East India Company to explore the breeding grounds of the famed horses of Turkistan. Moorcroft was the Superintendent of the Company stud. He had actually been recalled just beyond Peshawar, but decided to ignore his orders. See NAI Moorcroft’s Recall, 19 August 1825; IOR L/PS/6/34, Amherst to Secret Committee, 9 January 1824.

\(^62\) ‘From what I have seen of the condition of the transplanted Badakshies I verily believe that if they could see the lot of the Negroes in our West India Islands they would most joyfully exchange situations with them and find themselves great gainers by the bargain.’ IOR L/PS/5/109, Dispatch from Moorcroft to George Swinton, 6 June 1825.


this generation, slavery became a central issue of cultural identity. The abolitionist movement was one of the first and largest political movements of its kind, based on the redefinition of acceptable cultural practices.\textsuperscript{65} This issue was illustrative of some of the larger undercurrents reshaping liberal European thinking and society in the aftermath of the revolutionary period. While their Russian counterparts may not have shared the depth of British officers’ moral reserve, they utilized the moral language with which to justify, if not disguise their political ambitions. The British disquiet about Central Asian slavery, a key element of the ‘immoral economy’ of Afghanistan, was reflective of their more general view of the venality and illegitimacy of native governments.

Apart from their origin in the increasingly conservative norms of the early Victorian metropol, British views of the Afghan economy demonstrated a profound misunderstanding of its character and the nature of the Afghan and Central Asian political economies. These regions, unlike the Indian subcontinent over which the British ruled, were largely transit economies whose wealth depended on the transaction costs of goods, and in the case of slavery, people passing through them. Political authority rested on the ability of leaders to effectively distribute the surplus wealth to followers. In the main, this meant Afghan and Central Asian leaders were particularly dependent upon duty receipts from the passing caravan trade. This dependence deepened as the South Asian, Persian and Russian markets changed in their consumption habits, increasingly demanding European manufactures. These shifts in consumption further reduced the export markets for Afghan and Central Asian goods, in turn heightening the importance of the transit trade. Yet the transit trade was not limited to goods, but included service providers in the form of slaves. As the export value of the region’s agricultural products and manufactures eroded, leaders were able to collect less of the surplus transaction costs. They instead turned to another source of wealth, subject peoples, generally minorities or neighbours, seeing in them an opportunity to recoup their losses. Slaves became important for their transaction value, and the wealth created through their sale or labour benefited leaders, often directly as they instigated the enslavement in

the first place. Slavery was thus an important element of the larger Afghan transit and political economy, both based on the creation and harnessing of surplus transaction wealth.

The transaction value of slaves was most often realized through their ransoming. Slaves represented an important revenue source for the area’s rulers, who regularly ransomed them to the homelands and countrymen from which they were kidnapped. Their labour value, especially that of Persian and Russian slaves, was secondary to their ransom value. Indeed, well after their initial sale as slaves, many of these individuals were ransomed and returned. Some of them had been enslaved for years, while others had been kidnapped and enslaved more than once.\(^{66}\) Those not ransomed could be sold on the open slave market. For Afghan rulers in particular slavery represented an important revenue resource, through the sale of slaves, as well as a strategy of political control, through forced resettlement. More broadly, domestic slaves’ and concubines’ addition to the household economy gave their significance as a marker of social status an added economic character which cannot be ignored. While Muslim slavery may not have been a response to a labour crisis as in the Atlantic economy, it was a response to a labour need created by social practice.

**Slavery in Afghanistan**

Compared to its Central Asian neighbours, Afghanistan, or rather the Kingdom of Kabul practiced slavery on a considerably more circumscribed scale. While Mountstuart Elphinstone noted the presence of slaves during his 1809 embassy, he minimized their significance. Their transaction value seemingly outweighed their laboural input. Slaves in Afghanistan served in both domestic and agricultural settings. The latter more closely conformed to the general picture of Muslim slavery than their Central Asian counterparts. Many slaves were either offspring of slaves, Hindus taken during the Afghans’ previous large-scale raids into north India, or foreigners, such as Persians sold by Baluch tribesmen or Abyssinians imported

\(^{66}\) In Rustam’s account of his captivity, he related one of his kidnapped compatriots who informed him what to expect gained his knowledge from a previous experience as a slave. He apparently had recently been freed and found himself again kidnapped and enslaved. Khan-Urf, *The Diary of a Slave* (London, 1936), 67.
from Karachi.\footnote{Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Cabul, vol. 1, 318.} The Kafirs of northeast Afghanistan suffered heavily from the slave trade, with Elphinstone reporting most Kafir slaves were women taken for their exceptional beauty. G.T. Vigne related a conversation with a Kafir boy who had been kidnapped while tending sheep and sold into slavery. During their conversation, the boy laid down to demonstrate how he had been measured for sale, being five spans in height and sold for twenty rupees per span.\footnote{Vinge, A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan, 237–8.}

Elphinstone asserted the Pashtun Afghans generally disdained slavery, with the \textit{Pashtunwali} denigrating those who worked for other men.\footnote{Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Cabul, vol. 1, 318.} Additionally, the strength of syncretic Sufi traditions in Afghanistan, sharply contrasting with the strong tradition of literate theological orthodoxy seen in Bukhara, weakened the force of sectarian or confessional boundaries which elsewhere proved so central in the identification of slavery’s victims. Yet the theoretical explanation of a need for slave labour may be found in the \textit{Pashtunwali} and tribal norms. In general a highly nomadic people, the Pashtun required a large degree of political choice to be structurally afforded members of the tribe.\footnote{Golden, An Introduction to the Turkic Peoples. Ethnogenesis and state formation in medieval and early modern Eurasia and the Middle East (Wiesbaden, 1992), 4–5.} Tribesmen refused to work for rulers, creating a shortage of bonded labour borne of Pashtun tribal ethics. Rulers therefore needed a source to compensate for the labour their tribesmen denied. In this case, rulers preferred slavery (\textit{ghulamayat}) to tribal adoption (\textit{humsayeh}), as the former denied its victims the allegiance choice normally afforded the latter. Such a need for secured and bonded labour was doubly important around areas of agricultural productivity, especially Herat, suffering from the vicissitudes of war and depopulation. Yet Kamran’s attitude towards the \textit{ghulamayat}, as a source of temporary revenue rather than secured labour, reflects the priorities of cash-strapped Afghan leaders continually attempting to legitimate their rule. Kamran’s understanding of \textit{ghulamayat} was more rational than it at first appears. The social mobility of slaves prevented Afghan leaders from seeing them as a secure source of bonded labour. Instead, the one time gain the ruler made from their sale offered an immediate advantage insecure tribal leaders could not ignore. Thus for Afghan rulers, the \textit{ghulamayat} offered a revenue rather than labour solution. This may in part explain the relatively little use
of the institution within Afghanistan itself, especially when compared with its Central Asian neighbours.

**Slavery in the Punjab**

The persistence of the practice of slavery in Central Asia and Afghanistan continued to exert an influence over the parts of South Asia formerly vassals of the Durrani Empire. By the early nineteenth century, the Amirs of Sind were all but independent of the receding political authority of Kabul. Yet Kabul’s cultural standing remained influential. Richard Burton described Karachi’s annual importation of 6–700 black African slaves under the Amirs, with the women fetching up to forty to fifty pounds sterling. Elphinstone mentioned the presence of some of these Abyssinian slaves in Kabul as well. Likewise, the Punjab had been part of the Durrani Empire, with Ranjit Singh originally recognized as the vassal of Lahore. Kashmir, from whence many of the slaves in the Punjab came, was not lost to Kabul until after 1812, and not substantively gained by the Sikhs until 1818. Even after the creation of Ranjit’s Punjab and consequent animosity between himself and Dost Mohamed Khan, trade continued between these states, as did the subtler, yet penetrative cultural effects on social norms. Lohani traders made an annual trade migration from Kabul to the Indus, bringing with them not only fruits of the Kabul valley, but slave girls from Kafiristan, some of whom Ranjit purchased.

There remained a great cultural continuity in the treatment of women between north India, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Women were generally cloistered in the *harem*, or *zenana*, according to the practice of *purdah*. While these may be associated specifically with Muslim practice, they were not so restricted within the subcontinent. Rather, these practices were mediated through culturally appropriate

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71 Burton, *Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (Karachi, 1973), 253. Leopold von Orlich’s account largely corroborated Burton’s later observations, while giving slightly more detail. He claimed Abyssinian boys regularly sold for Rs. 60–100, while girls went as high as Rs. 250. Additionally, Orlich asserted that ‘Georgians were occasionally imported for the harems of the rich.’ Orlich, *Travels in India, including Sinde and the Punjab* (London, 1845), 79.

72 These traders are sometimes known as *powindahs* as well. Vinge, in describing Lohani women, noted that most were either Kafir slaves or their offspring, taken because of their beauty. Vinge, *A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan*, 43.
language and symbolism to adjust to specific circumstances. Thus, while the practice of slavery in the Punjab, and wider afield in north India remained distinct from the Central Asian variant, both were nonetheless informed by a common inheritance of Persianized cultural norms.

Despite the common cultural framework which allowed slavery to flourish from the Turkmen steppe through to South India, local conditions necessarily shaped the form bondage assumed. One of the most striking contrasts between Central and South Asian slavery was the lack of agricultural slaves in the latter. This omission, however, is not so surprising when one considers the prominence of bonded labour throughout South Asia. Bonded Indian labour, ryots defined by caste and living in a state of debt peonage substantively resembled Central Asian slaves. Yet they were perceptually distinct, with a ryots’ freedom of action circumscribed, while a slaves’ was non-existent. The reasons South Asia did not convert debt peons into slaves are complex, and differed from place to place. But in general, South Asian population density and agriculture created an abundance of labour tied to the land, in contrast to the sparsely populated Central Asian steppe. Ecology largely affected population density by creating or denying agricultural opportunities. Much of South Asia in general, and the Punjab in particular relied on dry-grain agriculture, whereas the Central Asian khanates maintained important economies of irrigated agriculture, considerably more labour-intensive. As well, the importance of the Central Asian transit economy imbued slaves with an immediate cash value not shared by their South Asian counterparts. Thus South Asia’s relative population density, its reliance on dry versus irrigated farming (at least in northwest India), and the social customs associated with the caste system largely accounts for why Indian bonded labour did not become South Asian agricultural slaves. The formal absence of slavery underlines deeper differences between South Asia’s fundamentally agriculture economy and Central Asia’s significant transaction economy. The ecological and economic demands specific to each locale shaped the expression of labour bondage differently.

73 For an overview discussion of the different types of servitude and bondage prevalent throughout the subcontinent, see generally Kumar, ‘Colonialism, bondage, and caste in British India’, in Klein (ed.), Breaking the Chains.

Apart from agricultural labour, slavery was widely practiced in the Indian domestic sphere.\(^{75}\) In the Punjab, domestic slavery claimed women as its main victims for largely the same reason as in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Additionally, one may infer the cultural preference for male offspring encouraged the sale of daughters into bondage. Yet the multiple roles performed by women in the Indian domestic sphere should not be collapsed into a single, monolithic category of ‘domestic slave’. Indeed, as elsewhere, Indian women, even when formally bonded or enslaved, maintained a variety of positions within the household, the power and prestige of which did not necessarily conform to their formal designation. A concubine and a menial servant may both be formally ‘slaves’ of their master, yet the concubine’s true position may more appropriately be compared to that of a wife than servant.\(^{76}\) Thus rather than collapsing the discussion into a dialectic between ‘slave’ and ‘free’, one need investigate the gradations of servitude, both formal and practical, which all women faced. South Asian slavery, or more narrowly slavery in the Punjab, must be understood as a social institution, shaped by the constraints and demands of the society which practiced it.

One facet of slavery proved universal throughout the dar-al islam, as well as South Asia—that of concubinage. Many Afghan and Central Asian sirdars (nobles), not to mention Persians and Punjabis, maintained sizeable harems. Their slave status did not necessarily relegate these women solely to positions of exploitation and impotence, although this was undoubtedly ever-present. Many of the concubines, especially in royal households, played important political roles, enhanced to the extreme in cases where they were the mothers of anointed successors.\(^{77}\) Concubinage provides an excellent example of the ‘gradation of servitude’. It was often substituted for marriage because it was considerably cheaper.\(^{78}\) Yet once the concubine and husband produced a male offspring, her status changed both de facto and de jure. The mother of Dost Mohamed Khan, the first Barakzai ruler of Afghanistan, was a Qizilbash concubine of the former vakil

\(^{75}\) See generally Chatterjee, Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India.

\(^{76}\) For an example of the variety of positions and statuses female ‘slaves’ and ‘concubines’ held in the Indian domestic sphere, see Pinch’s discussion in Pinch, ‘Goswain Tawaif: Slaves, sex and ascetics in Rasdhan’, 591–2.

\(^{77}\) See, for example the role played by Chehtee Begum, described as a Muslim concubine, in the succession of Narindargiri leadership of a gosain order in Bundelkhand. Ibid. 580–85.

\(^{78}\) Gordon, Slavery in the Arab World, 82.
of Timur Shah, Payinda Khan. Not all the members of the harem were slaves. Indeed, many of the senior members, although possibly ‘slaves’ in the formal sense, possessed a greater amount of freedom than most ‘free’ women, including their masters’ wives. Many of these women were taught to dance, sing and recite poetry, thus enhancing their value on the market. Masters understood such education to be an investment in their property. Female harems, though the norm, were not the only type of harem some rulers maintained. In his Diary, Rustam Khan-Urf notes Amir Said Alim Bahadur, the last ruler of Bukhara, was reported to have two harems—one of over 100 women and one of ‘nectarine-complexioned dancing boys’.

While Ranjit Singh’s Sikh court was certainly not the only South Asian one to patronize slavery in the form of female concubinage, the Punjab kingdom’s location astride the north Indian heartland and the ‘barbaric beyond’ of Afghanistan makes it a case of particular interests. As effectively the last major ‘native’ power in the subcontinent not under the control or influence of the East India Company, Ranjit’s Punjab continued practices the reformist Governor General William Bentinck attempted to eradicate within the lands under Company paramountcy. Slavery, at least female slavery, was relatively common in the Punjab, with the main victims from the hills as far as Kashmir. Victor Jacquemont, travelling through the Punjab and to Kashmir from 1829–31, insisted that

All female servants in the Punjab are slaves; and, in spite of the exertions of the English to abolish the custom, it nevertheless prevails also in the north

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81 Upon fleeing Bukhara, the Amir abandoned his female harem to Soviet soldiers, but rescued at least some of his boys. So proud of this harem was he that he had gold medals minted and given to the parents who offered their boys to his service. Rustam claimed to have seen a number in circulation. Khan-Urf, The Diary of a Slave (London, 1936), 41.
82 For an interesting, although truncated discussion of the significance of concubines and dancing girls at the Peshwa of the Marathas, see Rege, ‘The hegemonic appropriation of sexuality: the case of the lavani performers of Maharashtra’, in Uberoi (ed.), Social reform, sexuality and the state (New Delhi, 1996).
83 For a dated overview of Bentinck’s term and reforms, see generally Bearce, ‘Lord William Bentinck: The application of liberalism to India’, The Journal of Modern History 28, 3 (1956).
of India. They are treated tolerably well, and their condition is hardly worse than that of their mistresses in the harem.\textsuperscript{84}

He blamed the near-constant demand of India and the Punjab for Kashmir women for what he considered the ugliness of the area’s female population, writing ‘It is true that all little girls who promise to turn out pretty, are sold at eight years of age, and carried off into the Punjab and India. Their parents sell them at from twenty to three hundred francs—most commonly fifty or sixty.'\textsuperscript{85} During periods of acute economic distress, when parents from the hill tribes were more amenable to selling their daughters into slavery, prices could drop as low as fifteen rupees, as during the 1833–4 Punjab famine.\textsuperscript{86} The impoverished state of the hill kingdoms, ravaged by years of unrest and warfare, economically hard-hit by shifts in international tastes, and suffering from high tribute exactions, made their inhabitants amongst the poorest of north India.\textsuperscript{87}

The prevalence of concubinage engendered a profoundly sexual character to South Asian slavery in the early nineteenth century. H.M. Lawrence, the brother of Punjab fame, claimed that ‘In the countries east of the Indus the slave trade is limited in a great measure to the purchase and sale of girls for the purposes of prostitution, or for the supply of the harams of the great...’\textsuperscript{88} Girls sold on the open market, while potentially ending up as some sort of domestic servant, usually ended up in a position of sexual exploitation, at times

\textsuperscript{84} Jacquemont, Letters from India: Describing a journey in the British dominions of India, Tibet, Lahore, and Cashmere during the years 1828, 1829, 1830, 1831 undertaken by order of the French government (Karachi, 1979). 65.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. 65, 74–5.


\textsuperscript{87} This was especially true of Kashmir, whose famed shawls fell out of favour because of trade disruptions and changes in tastes. NAI Moorcroft to Swinton, 10 October 1823. See also Rizvi, Trans-Himalayan Caravans: Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh (New Delhi, 2001), 59.

\textsuperscript{88} Although Lawrence’s Adventures was a fictionalized account of a European officer in Ranjit’s service, this particular quotation comes from a factual footnote to the text discussing slavery in the Punjab and beyond. Citing the reports of Majors Sleeman and Crawford, Lawrence went on to say that ‘...westward of that river [the Indus], especially in the countries bordering upon Turkistan, men and women are equally made the subjects of barter.’ Lawrence, Adventures of an Officer in the Service of Runjeet Singh (Karachi, 1975), 140–41.
forced into prostitution. Amritsar, the Sikh’s holy city, claimed a 600 strong community of prostitutes. Those who became prostitutes were usually owned, or at least controlled by kanjars (pimps) who began the girls’ training from an early age, usually around ten. In addition to girls from the hills, some kanjars reportedly had Afghan and Central Asian women brought annually by the Lohani traders. As in Afghanistan, the light skin and green eyes of the Kafir women made them the most highly valued. These women, working the villages and non-courtly classes charged up to one rupee per hour; the young with pretty features could go as high as two rupees. Despite Ranjit’s formal ban on slavery in 1836, Lawrence commented ten years later that ‘In no country in the east does prostitution appear to be so much legalized as in the Punjab, nor does it anywhere exist to so great and unblushing an extent.’

Lawrence’s attitudes towards the ‘loose morals’ of the Punjab and his claim of the wide-spread persistence of prostitution forces one to engage with an issue latent in virtually all the observations of European travellers and officials during this period. Their bias and consequent ‘construction of the native’ coloured both their observation and commentary. The character of that colouration was neither universal, nor uniform making some accounts more, and some less reliable. It is important to examine the effect of ‘Orientalism’ both on the depiction of indigenous peoples and the larger issue of gender construction in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India. Lawrence’s conflation of female slavery with prostitution is a clear case in point. If most of the ‘prostitutes’ were indeed female slaves forced into sexual activity, why did he not refer to them as sex slaves? Lawrence’s decision to refer to them as prostitutes largely denuded these women of the moral protection of victimhood, instead pejoratively labelling them as moral outcasts. By doing so, he reinforced and increased the distance between ‘licentious and lazy’ Indians, given over to moral depravity, and Europeans whose best efforts failed to moderate the natural inclinations of the Indian character.

India was not the only colonial space where British administrators encountered local practices clearly contrary to the Empire’s ‘civilizing ethic’, or more specifically with the issue of concubinage based on

90 Ibid. 564–5.
91 Ibid. 563.
92 Lawrence, Adventures of an Officer in the Service of Ranjeet Singh, 141.
female slavery.93 Northern Nigeria later presented the British with the same dilemma. Official policy stood firmly against the institution of slavery, and therefore should have required the colonial administration to suppress the practice.94 Yet concubinage was a practice common amongst the Northern Nigerian elite, the very people British colonial administrators needed to cultivate as collaborators in order to best secure their rule. Given this situation, local imperial administrators borrowed a leaf from the book of former East India Company administrators, conflating concubinage with marriage and allowing the continuation of the practice through legal slight of hand.95 By doing so, the British accommodated the practice within the abolitionist framework of colonial administration.

Lawrence’s moral marginalization of female concubines in India, and later British efforts to reconcile the largely unaltered practice to colonial moral imperatives elsewhere, completely ignored the issue of choice afforded these women. For unlike the mid-Victorian mindset, most societies where slave-based concubinage was practised held a more temporized, if not positive view of the institution. While one need be careful not to uncritically digest pro-bondage arguments about benefits to the slaves themselves, it must be recognized that for many concubines, their enslaved position signified a step up in the world. Only the richest households could afford to support concubines (as opposed to domestic servants), who often heralded from poverty-stricken areas where their families sold daughters into slavery out of economic necessity. In impoverished areas such as

95 Macauley’s Law Commission and its proposed legal reforms likewise blurred the lines between marriage and concubinage, stating ‘...those who live in the zenanas may be considered as coming under this class, the connection in this case is a quasi-marriage.’ Indrani Chatterjee argues that, ‘In the face of an abolitionist agitation, the simple reduction of the complex and different grades of slavery into ‘marriage’ relations by the Law Commission absolved the Company of any responsibility to legally end slave-concubinage in the English officers and soldiers’ households. On the other hand, the acute awareness of slave-concubinage within the indigenous ruling houses enable administrators to manipulate political succession and finances. Furthermore, this manipulation, as Lovejoy and Hagendorn argue, entailed curtailing the web of claims and rights accorded to slaves and slave-born in Islamic and indigenous legal structures.’ Chatterjee, Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India, 20–1. Kunal Parker argues the later exclusion of concubine relations from marriage had important implications for the development of Hindu legal norms. Parker, “A corporation of superior prostitutes”, 622.
Kashmir and the petty hill rajahs, the sale of a female daughter provided an economically beneficial alternative to female infanticide. Daughters, or sons offered as tribute to royal harems, additionally carried a prestige value for the family. Slavery thus presented families a viable economic and social strategy of survival, and sometimes even improvement. For many of the members of Ranjit Singh’s harem who arrived through purchase or tribute, their status and condition was often considerably bettered, despite the fact they were slaves. In fact, the more privileged ‘slaves’ often lived more comfortably than their free counterparts. This again emphasizes the need to differentiate these otherwise monolithic, and often misleading characterizations of ‘slave’ and ‘free’. Bearing a master’s male progeny immeasurably enhanced a concubine’s status in Muslim households as the child’s status was paternally determined. It must be stressed though, that as one moved down the economic ladder in terms of their masters’ status, the women’s condition and room for choice likewise deteriorated. As Kopytoff and Mier have argued, the entry point of a slave into society largely determined of their social status and mobility.

Although these women were slaves, there were not denuded of their individual agency. Within the households and harems in which they served, a complicated hierarchal structure operated at a number of levels—between slaves and free women, between slaves and freemen, between slaves of both sexes, as well as between the concubines themselves. In the royal Ottoman harem, the intra-concubine hierarchy was well defined. The concubine mother of the current sultan presided unrivalled as head of the harem, followed by mothers of the sultan’s other offspring, down to beautiful entertainers recruited, but not yet recognized either figuratively or sexually by the sultan. 96 While in specific form the Ottoman harem undoubtedly differed significantly from those found in Central and South Asia, the stratification within them would not be wholly alien to the over 200 concubines of the Nawab of Oudh. 97 In regular households with female slaves, whether explicitly considered concubines or not, the slaves were ‘acculturated’ through the mediation of the houses’ other slaves, and ultimately free women, especially the wives. 98 This space of acculturation offered the most pronounced opportunities for the

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96 Alderson, *The structure of the Ottoman Dynasty*, 79–81.
97 This was in addition to his four wives. Orlich, *Travels in India, including Sinde and the Punjab*, 108.
98 Lovejoy, ‘Concubinage and the status of women slaves’, 263.
assertion of individual agency. The slave women could interpret aspects of their new role through their own individually and socially moulded lens. For example, in Ranjit Singh’s durbar, Kashmiri Muslim nautch girls regularly recited poetry in Persian rather than Punjabi.99 The specific extent and character of individual agency obviously depended on individual situations. But it is important when examining the institution and the opportunities it created to recognize that space for individual agency, even of slave women, remained an important, though circumscribed feature.

Of perhaps less consequence to the mass of people, but more important was the courtesan culture of concubinage, based on female slavery, cultivated by Ranjit Singh’s court. Singh himself boasted over 150 ‘dancing girls’ who undoubtedly seconded as concubines. This number was not static, as most girls were retired from court between the ages of eighteen and twenty.100 In ‘retirement’, most took up residence on the land grants (jaghirs) awarded to them for their service. One of Ranjit’s favourites, Kaulan (Lotus) received a jaghir of ‘seven good villages’ to which she retired.101 Ranjit’s girls were well looked after and wore expensive clothing and jewellery. Heliose, a Kafir brought to the Punjab by Lohani traders, reportedly wore ornaments valued at between Rs. 10–12,000 and a Kashmir shawl worth Rs. 1000.102 Clearly, these women were highly valued, but not simply for their sexual and entertainment value. The nautch girls were important status symbols within the court and Ranjit entertained nearly all his guests, including two British Governors General, with them.103 These women were yet another means by which Ranjit demonstrated his wealth and munificence. His troupe of dancing girls and concubines were not the only ones present at the Lahore durbar. Most of his courtiers maintained their own harems, including Generals. Avitabile and Ventura, the European commanders of the Khalsa’s famed Fauj-i

99 This also had important political implications as Persian was the language patronized by Ranjit Singh’s court.
100 Gupta, History of the Sikhs: the Sikh Lion of Lahore V, 570.
101 Osborne, The Court and Camp of Ranjeet Singh (Karachi, 1973), 96.
102 Gupta, History of the Sikhs: the Sikh Lion of Lahore, vol. 5, 571.
103 A dancing girl named Kaira, who was renowned to be the best singer in Ranjit’s entourage, entertained Lord Bentinck. Hugel, Travels in Kashmir and the Panjáb: containing a particular account of the government and character of the Sikhs (London, 1845), 345.
Most of the women in these harems, like their poorer counterparts working the alleys of Amritsar, were from the hills, as well as parts of Afghanistan and Central Asia. They were usually ‘recruited’, or rather purchased around the age of five and trained for nine years. Not all the young girls were kidnapped or sold. Some of them were the offspring of the older nautch girls. Others were offered as tribute to the Lahore durbar, especially from some of the hill rajas. Kaulan was originally brought to durbar as part of the tribute from Kashmir. Rarely were these girls sold from court service, except in instances where their talents proved lacking or a particularly good business opportunity presented itself. The fact these girls were generally not traded on the market like their Central Asian counterparts largely underlines their symbolic, not to mention sexual worth to their masters. Training them in the arts of dance, poetry and song not only was in good diplomatic tastes, but also reflected their patronage of the arts.

The practices of the Punjab stood in contrast to those of Company territory, but not as starkly as one might imagine. Company ambivalence towards the practice of slavery in areas not directly governed by it allowed the slave market in Delhi to continue in operation, unhindered, until Charles Metcalfe closed it in 1812. Through the beginning of the nineteenth century it was common for Company servants to have Indian concubines, or bibis, although they were supposedly free. David Ochterlony, the rather ‘eccentric’ resident

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104 Gupta, History of the Sikhs: the Sikh Lion of Lahore, vol. 5, 565. The tomb of Anarkali houses the remains of Anarkali, Jahangir’s famous Sufi mistress killed by his father Akbar. Ranjit originally gave the tomb to Ventura as his home, but Ventura later moved next door to the same building Lawrence later occupied, instead housing his harem in the tomb. After the British annexation of the Punjab, the tomb served as an Anglican church. At the turn of the twentieth century, it again changed function, transforming into the home of the Punjab Provincial Archives, a function it still serves.

105 Hugel, Travels in Kashmir and the Panjab, 344.

106 Hugel claimed none of Ranjit’s dancing girls were slaves or forced to enter his service. This assertion, however, conflicts with the opinions of a number of other travellers, including Osbourne and Jacquemont. Ibid.

107 Osborne, The Court and Camp of Runjeet Singh, 86.

108 The wife of Muhammad Khan Barakzai, Afghan sirdar of Peshawar and brother of Dost Mohamed Khan the ruler of Kabul, sold Ranjit Singh a slave girl of particular interest to him for an undisclosed price. Gupta, History of the Sikhs: the Sikh Lion of Lahore, V, 564.

109 Ibid. vol. 5, 565.

110 See generally Ghosh, ‘Colonial companions: bibis, begums and concubines of the British in North India, 1760–1830’ (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California,
at Delhi, had thirteen such women who generally accompanied him in public.\footnote{See Pran, Rare Glimpses of the Raj (Mumbia, 1998), 6. Illicit relationships between local women and British officers are well documented. Charles Metcalfe, later Governor General of Jamaica and at one time thought likely to succeed Lord Bentinck as Governor General of India, had an Indian mistress he met at the court of Ranjit Singh. They had three children together. James Skinner reportedly had a harem of fourteen wives with over eighty children, although the family always insisted it was no more than seven. Hyam, Empire and Sexuality: the British experience (Manchester, 1990), 114, 117.} While Governor General William Bentinck waged a determined campaign against sati, he failed to denounce the continued practice of concubinage amongst India’s elite or the underlying practice of slavery supporting it.\footnote{Despite Parliamentary support for a ban on slavery in India engineered largely by Charles Grant, Lord Bentinck decided not to press the issue on a conservative Board of Directors and likely recalcitrant Indian ruling class. Bearce, ‘Lord William Bentinck: The application of liberalism to India’, The Journal of Modern History 28, 3 (1956). 245.} In fact the practice of maintaining nautch girls was not restricted to Ranjit’s European servants, but was also shared by some of the Company’s own, prominent Anglo-Indian servants. Emily Eden, Lord Auckland’s sister, recorded attending a performance of Col. Skinner’s nautch girls.\footnote{Eden enjoyed the nautch at Col. Skinner’s considerably more than the one hosted by the Rajah of Benares for her brother. She commented that Skinner had Delhi’s best singers and dancers in attendance. Eden, Up the Country: letter written to her sister from the Upper Provinces of India (London, 1978). 28, 101. Dated 22 November 1837 and 25 February 1838 respectively.} Far from being abhorred by the entire scene, she wrote in her journal ‘People may abuse nautching, but it always amuses me extremely. The girls hardly move about at all, but their dresses and attitudes are so graceful I like to see them. Their singing is dreadful, and very noisy.’\footnote{Ibid. 124. Dated 2 April 1838.}

Emily Eden’s enjoyment of the spectacle was not shared officially by the Company establishment. Arguably, one reason for this reticence stemmed from the fact that as most of the nautch girls were slaves, public discussion of nautching would force the Company to deal with the continuation of the practice of slavery within its territories. Indian administrators undoubtedly loathed the possibility of being pressured to interfere in one of the most sensitive areas of the private lives of collaborating elites. Political expedience required the Company to avoid such potentially explosive interference at all costs. Additionally, such a discussion would likely have spilled over into the uncomfortable
the issue of sexual relations between Company officers and native women. Of the many subjects appearing taboo during the so-called ‘Age of Reform’, this one topped the list of an increasingly conservative expatriate British community influenced by the Evangelical norms then permeating metropolitan political and social mores.115 When the British did address the issue in the 1840s, it eventually took the form of the infamous ‘doctrine of lapse’.116 Official attitudes were understood to be a repudiation of earlier practices of Company servants and of the ‘decadence’ of late Mughal India.117

Despite the best efforts of some to avoid the issue of concubinage or inter-racial sexual relations, Company records provide at least one instance where the political ramifications of personal relations necessitated official attention. The story centred on Bannu Begum, one of the wives of Shahzadeh Timur, eldest son of Shah Shuja, the Afghan ruler exiled in Ludhiana.118 She escaped the royal zenana with two female slaves and took refuge in the house of a Lt. Maidmen of the Sixth Horse Artillery, where they were all later discovered. An uproar followed with accusations and counteraccusations making the depositions forwarded to the Board of Control an almost lurid read. Bannu Begum, a widow formally married to a private English trader, complained of harsh treatment and abuse by Shahzadeh Timur and his mother. Both she and Lt. Maidmen denied having an affair. Lt. Maidmen claimed he was only protecting the Begum and her slaves after hearing the story of horrors and abuse she suffered within the royal zenana. Capt. Wade, the political officer stationed in Ludhiana, faced a conundrum, needing to placate an incensed Shah Shuja for political expediency, while simultaneously being careful not to overly impinge on either Maidmen’s or the Begum’s honour.

In the end, Wade apologized to Shuja and constructed a wall around the Shah’s cantonment to safeguard the royal dignity and avoid further

115 See generally Ghosh, ‘Colonial companions: bibis, begums and concubines of the British in North India’; Hyam, Empire and Sexuality.
117 Ibid. 593.
118 IOR F/4/1345/53440, Further papers regarding Shah Shuja—one of the wives of Mirza Muhammad Timur, the Shah’s eldest son, escapes from the royal zenana along with two female slaves—they are eventually sent to Delhi—a brick wall is built to separate Shuja’s living quarters from the rest of the Ludhiana cantonment, May 1818–Dec 1830; NAI Wade to Hawkins, 12 March 1830; NAI Wade to F. Hawkins, Officiating Delhi Resident, 12 March 1830; NAI Petition of Binnee Begum to Lt. Col. Faithfull, 12 March 1830.
incidents. Maidmen was reprimanded and transferred to another posting, though one must wonder if there were any more dire than the dusty little town of Ludhiana on the Punjab frontier. Bannu Begum and her two slaves were not forced to return to the uncertain, though likely unwelcome fate awaiting them in the recesses of Timur’s *zenana*. They were instead allowed to move to Delhi. Although the Board of Control added little comment except to approve Wade’s actions, the fact this incident generated such a substantial body of correspondence, working its way to the top of Company bureaucracy, reflects the importance with which they viewed the incident. That importance, while largely political in character, was not solely derived from the insult caused to a burdensome exiled monarch on the fringes of Company territory. Undoubtedly, the spectre of a British subaltern having an affair with the wife of Afghan royalty disturbed senior officials. Yet one cannot but assume they also looked at the maintenance of a harem, complete with female slaves, with a kind of Orientalist fascination given visual expression by the works of Delacroix. While this remains speculation, all the Company officials involved were scathing in their denouncement of Maidmen’s actions, but curiously silent regarding Bannu Begum’s treatment at the hands of Shahzadeh Timur.

**Addendum—Central Asian Slavery in the Twentieth Century**

As late as 1920, slavery and the slave trade continued in Central Asia, even in lands under the nominal control of the new Bolshevik soviet. Rustam Khan-Urf’s *Diary of a Slave* is a remarkable personal account of Central Asian slavery. Detailing an unspecified period of captivity and forced labour in the 1920s, his story ranges from

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119 This was not the first instance where the sanctity of the Shah’s *zenana* had been disturbed, and his honour thus compromised. *See also* PPA Wade to Colebrooke, 27 September 1827; PPA Murray to Birch, 24 April 1818.

120 The first part of Rustam’s diary gives a short account of his personal history. Born into a moderately wealthy Pashtun family, his father sent him to Britain to pursue a scientific education. His father’s untimely death cut his studies short and forced him to seek employment, which he found as a personal secretary to a native prince in India. After serving a number of princes, he decided to go into business. Khan-Urf claims he ended up in Central Asia after being inspired by the business opportunities there, which a rug dealer in Chandi Chowk, Old Delhi, told him of. At the time of his enslavement, he had spent a number of months purchasing rugs wholesale in Bukhara and was off to the countryside to attempt to buy the rugs direct from some of their tribal weavers. Khan-Urf, *The Diary of a Slave*. 
interviews with Bolshevik authorities in Tashkent to pearl diving in the Red Sea. Although it covers a period beyond the scope of this paper, Rustam’s narrative is an invaluable personal account of captivity. While the veracity of Rustam’s narrative is necessarily subject to scholarly scepticism, bearing in mind both his background and audience, the contextual details surrounding his narrative are compelling. He obviously held a sophisticated knowledge of the region, its peoples and practices. Even if the detail were fictitious, it nonetheless presents an accurate depiction based on the historical record. Despite the fact it was the 1920s and throughout the region modern state structures and authorities had been established, even if only in incipient forms, Rustam’s captivity clearly demonstrates both these authorities’ ambivalence and impotence in the suppression of the slave trade.

Rustam’s captivity began when he was kidnapped in a local market town outside of Bukhara, an area under Russian authority since the late 1870s. After his initial offering on the bidding block failed to solicit any reasonable bid, Abdul, the slaver who kidnapped him, decided to keep him. The weakness of the market was largely inspired by fear the new Soviet authorities would seize and free slaves. While in the long-term this was true, little in Rustam’s narrative suggests Soviet authorities were either interested in or capable of suppressing the remnants of the slave trade at the time. At one point during his captivity, Rustam recorded an interview with a Khivan merchant who complained there was much forced labour under the Reds.121 Both the Khivans and the Russians claimed a long collective memory of bonded labour. It is therefore little surprise the Soviets turned to ‘forced labour’ where their countrymen had once been subjected to slavery. One is left to wonder though who provided this forced labour—local Turkmen tribesmen or Russian political exiles.

Rustam’s contacts with governmental authorities during his captivity were minimal. Soviet Ogpu (Secret Police) outside Tashkent once stopped Abdul’s caravan and Rustam was dispatched to the city to deal with the authorities. While appearing a perfect opportunity to appeal for his freedom, the Soviet officials’ demonstrated incompetence would have likely made such an exercise futile.122 The second incident, interestingly enough, involved the Royal Indian Navy patrolling the Persian Gulf. Abdul decided at one point to enter the ‘legitimate’

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121 Ibid. 201.
caravan business and transport Indian Khalifat refugees from Kitab, outside Bukhara, to the Turkish border. His true motive, however, was to sell the human carriage into slavery in a more secure market, namely Oman. He led the caravan to the shores of the Gulf, south of Shiraz. There they met a Somali counterpart who had arranged dhow transport across the Gulf. It was during this crossing Abdul, Rustam and the slave cargo were twice stopped by the same Royal Indian Navy ship. Both times the British officer and Indian boatswain left convinced of the traffic’s innocence. This perception was no doubt bolstered by the less than friendly reception these representatives of British authority met with from the Khalifat refugees. These refugees still believed they were on their pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{123}

Apart from the portrait of lax government oversight painted by Rustam’s account, he also offers some interesting details regarding the workings of the slave trade itself. After his enslavement, Rustam’s main duty as Abdul’s slave involved herding the caravan’s camels. This responsibility was later complemented by his ‘promotion’ to cook for Abdul and his family. In Abdul’s domain, authority was enforced through intimidation and violence, generally dealt out at the end of a camel whip Rustam described as tearing the skin like a razor. The intricacies and admonitions of Islamic law discussed above had little traction either with Abdul or the other slaves Rustam encountered during his time in captivity. He was forced to act as an accomplice in taking other slaves. During a raid on a village, he held the camels as Abdul and his men gathered both people and animals to abscond with. Despite his horror, Rustam found that the new captives held an indifferent, if not positive attitude towards their new situation. Food was assured, the women met new men, and their new life was considerably more exciting than their previous village existence. Rustam’s account gives valuable insight into the personal experience of forced servitude, complementing, and at times contradicting commonly held assumptions. It underlines both the wide diversity of practice within the institution of slavery, as well as the dissonance between theoretical constructions and practical realities. While one may argue the lateness of his experience, at a time when slavery was threatened with total suppression in Central Asia, partly explains its brutality and negates its instructive value for earlier periods, his work nonetheless offers a singularly unique perspective.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid. 215–62.
Rustam’s narrative highlights the continuation of a practice rhetorically abolished fifty years previously with the Russian conquests of Central Asia. Yet a significant number of people—between 12–15,000 as late as 1920—worked as heavy slave labourers in Central Asian irrigated agriculture. The size of this labour force earlier in the nineteenth century is impossible to quantify. As well, the conditions these mainly Russian slaves laboured under are difficult to assess. Their status likely deteriorated over time as the Khivan and Bukharan agricultural economies turned to labour-intensive cash crops, especially cotton, in response to growing Russian demand. The limited cash-crop agriculture of the early nineteenth century makes it as likely many of these agricultural labourers worked for small independent farmers as for massive landowners. The fundamental changes experienced by the region’s economy as it integrated into the newly emergent global economy largely shaped the labour demands of the agriculture sector, and thus slave market. Integration into the global economy fundamentally changed the Central Asian economy, transforming it from a transaction based transit economy to a primary-producer periphery attached to the Russian economy. Thus for those remaining in servitude at the end of the nineteenth century, conditions were likely worse in a Russian protectorate than had previously been the case under the independent Khivan khanate. The deterioration of conditions, however, must be juxtaposed with the overall decrease of the number of persons enslaved as it became more difficult to maintain the institution under the Tsarist regime.

Conclusion

The lack of academic literature on Central and South Asian slavery from the eighteenth century onwards, when juxtaposed to its prominence in the archival record is indeed perplexing. This article has attempted to begin a discussion of this topic by offering a rough characterization and categorization of the phenomenon in the nineteenth century throughout the region. While Central Asia appears to have been the centre, in terms of volume, of the continuing slave trade, the institution was pervasive, at least at higher levels of society,

124 Ibid. 69.
125 For a discussion of the economies of the Central Asian khanates, see Holdsworth, *Turkestan in the 19th Century*. 
throughout the lands of Islamic cultural influence. Central Asian slavery differed markedly from that practiced in Afghanistan, as they both did from the practice common in the Punjab and South Asia. To varying extents though, all these areas continued human trafficking in order to satisfy different, social and symbolic needs. Unlike its Atlantic counterpart, slavery was not so much an economic institution as a social one. However the economic and laboural contributions of slaves in the domestic context, and the larger implications of those contributions for the economic functions of societies as a whole remain wholly under-recognized. While slaves, especially female concubines were generally a luxury good for symbolic, and often sexual consumption, they played an important role in areas of social labour. Islamic jurisprudence did not treat slaves as mere chattel. In most cases, the practice was little more severe than some forms of bonded labour practiced by European powers, notably serfdom in Russia. Nor did the practice take on the overtly racial character it assumed in the West. Instead, slavery was defined by sectarian allegiance and governed by religious norms. By the nineteenth century, most slaves were women, largely a consequence of the practice’s social and sexual significance.

Slavery in Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia remains seriously understudied, if not taboo within academic circles for unaccountable reasons. While this article has focused on ‘Muslim slavery’, the inclusion of Ranjit Singh’s Sikh Punjab underlines the fact it was a cross-confessional phenomenon. In Central Asia, slavery appears to have been more multi-purposed than further south, serving as a labour reservoir for the khanates irrigated agriculture, a revenue source for both the khanates and cash-strapped Afghan rulers, and a source of sexual bondage. In South Asia, the phenomenon was politely restricted to the latter, with even Company servants maintaining their own concubines and nautch girls. The effect and implications of this practice on gender relations throughout the regions remains unexplored and difficult to assess. Slavery, in its wider manifestation, continued well into the twentieth century in Central Asia, as Rustam Khan-Urf’s narrative of his own captivity so clearly demonstrates. The continuation of the practice through the colonial period, even if at considerably reduced levels, was nonetheless an important social, sexual and in some cases economic phenomenon. British Indian administrators were the first of many imperial officials forced to accommodate theoretically indefensible practices within the context of a collaboration dependent colonial state. Understanding both the
local character of the practice of slavery, as well as both local and British reaction to it, lends greater analytical depth and knowledge to an important institution widespread through much of the region. Just as understanding of the Atlantic economy has been so richly enhanced by the study of the slave trade, so too will understanding of Central and South Asian society benefit from a more detailed examination of this hitherto ignored topic.